

June 2019

# Review of European Democracy Support

*An Executive Summary of Findings and  
Recommendations*

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

European support for democracy is at a crossroads. The next decade will have a major bearing on what democracy means for the European Union (EU) at a time of increasing awareness of fundamental technological change, climate risks, demographic adjustment and power shifts between and within continents. Democratic governance should no longer be taken for granted within Europe or in European foreign policy. Political choices will need to be made that determine how important democracy is for European states and what to do as a consequence.

It is with these choices in mind that we embarked, 18 months ago, on a review of European support for democracy. This has included several stand-alone papers on democracy support and numerous multi-stakeholder meetings with academics, activists, civil society, donors, experts, policy-makers and think-tanks. The review looked at what European democracy support has achieved (the past), what can be improved today (the present) and where democracy support should be headed (the future). There were some things we expected to find in this review and there were also some surprises.

Democracy offers us the greatest potential for achieving sustainable development, respect for human rights and long-term stability. But democracy is not a perfect political system and can be dominated by powerful interest groups, short-termism, identity politics and the translation of healthy competition into conflict or violence. Today, these challenges are more real than ever.

## **Past | How successful has European democracy support been until now?**

Europe plays a key role in the minds of pro-democracy actors around the world, on the international stage and in terms of both political and financial support. Accession criteria to the EU have been a major success in promoting democratic governance in Europe over the last half century. This spread of democracy around Europe has been one of the most remarkable changes in governance in recent human history. In the last decade, European states have been at the forefront of assisting democratic development in Ukraine, Myanmar, Colombia, Georgia, the Gambia and many other countries. Yet, our review has shown that it is

very difficult to say how successful European democracy support has been overall. This is in part because of the need to look at specific countries to see what democracy support looks like in practice; and in part because there is simply no reliable and comparable data on how much money is spent on democracy support.

A proper policy analysis of democracy support is not possible because most EU member states do not have a clear policy. Neither, it must be said, does the EU. No overarching policy framework means no clear definition, strategy, approach or objectives on democracy support. Comparing the policies or adding up aid figures is also exceedingly difficult, because of the different ways of categorising funding and the diverse characteristics assigned to democracy. It is therefore necessary to look at specific country cases to drill down on what is being achieved.

We looked at four countries. In Armenia, the EU and member states have consistently supported democracy in the country and contributed to a flourishing civic society, yet democracy assistance programmes often failed to tackle the underlying obstacles to sustainable democratisation like a fair judicial system and media independence. In Zimbabwe, European democracy assistance made positive contributions to civil society, the reform of the constitution and the judiciary, but there are indications that EU engagement also had unintended side-effects particularly through the use of sanctions. Tunisia, on the other hand, has seen significant support with limited direct impact from European actors, in part due to the overwhelming focus of engagement on stability through support to economic development and the security sector. In Honduras, European support has had difficulty addressing the rule of law but made a positive contribution in areas where EU member states' activities were complementary, such as human rights and election observation.

There are thus clear success stories from European democracy support in these countries, but the mixed results push us to look at how to learn from challenges and build on successes.

## **Present | How to consolidate and enhance European democracy support today?**

Several specific steps could be taken at both policy and operation level, as well as in the way money is spent. First off, European states need a democracy support policy framework that guides EU democracy support and frames it within foreign policy and development objectives. This framework should consider democracy support as a tool of EU policy rather than democracy as a normative - and often unfulfilled - principle. An overall framework would tackle several challenges identified in our review, including the need for greater clarity of purpose and improved coordination.

Secondly, an effort must also be made in improving our understanding of what works and what does not - the dearth of policy level analysis is glaring. This needs to be complemented by the systematic collection of comparative data. Development aid is under pressure from greater citizen scrutiny around Europe and it seems as though a certain fear of poor results hinders the development of a stronger evidence base. This is a strategic mistake. Democracy support needs to confront failures, understand successes and build on them before it is too late.

Finally, the way money is spent could be enhanced through focusing on change rather than process. We offer suggestions for doing this, including diverting funds from the executive branch of government when democratic breakdown occurs in a country. On the flip side, reformers need to be supported financially through a rapid financial response following a sudden democratic breakthrough.

## **Future | What key features could a new democracy support policy be built upon?**

Europe must be bold. The international system is changing before our eyes in a manner that is more rapid than ever before and the place of democratic politics looks less certain than a decade ago. We must recognise that supporting democracy is a political challenge - it will take concerted commitment and perseverance.

Citizens should be a core target for democracy supporters, in Europe and elsewhere. Education on democratic principles in schools must not shy away from tackling the negatives of democratic politics. We cannot say that democracy is perfect - but we can teach the importance of working within the system. European states should give serious consideration to the creation of a European Democracy Academy that can improve our knowledge of democratic development and school professionals from different spheres on democratic politics.

Europe is the home of a certain strand of democracy that has morphed and developed over the centuries to what we see today. It will continue to mutate. European states need to be a forefront of this innovation and show global leadership on democratic governance. A global conference on democracy held in Europe on an annual basis with the participation of heads of state is a first step in asserting leadership. The power of political symbols should not be lost in the here and now.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## 1. KNOWLEDGE | Why are we doing this?

Democracy is a concept without an institutional home. In some senses, this is natural given that representative democracy calls for the dispersion of power among institutions and people, but it creates certain complexities for those that seek to support democracy around the world. People value democracy but cannot define it. Everyone is involved yet only some decide. It is a word sometimes derided in democracies but found in the official name of autocratic states. Democracy is a principle *and* it is a practice. While there is agreement on some key characteristics of democracy, there is no international agreement on a precise definition of democracy.

What is also clear is that there is no unifying purpose for supporting democracy shared by European actors. European support for democracy tends to fall somewhere in between human rights commitments, traditional development policy and foreign policy concerns. Within the EU institutions, democracy is most commonly associated with human rights (e.g. EU treaties, official statements, the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights). At the same time, the way in which democracy is supported uses the standard procedures of development policy (e.g. logframes, evaluation criteria for programmes). Yet democracy is also about the way power is exercised by states and is therefore a crucial foreign policy concern. For European governments, our analysis shows that the rationale for supporting democracy mixes the same logic of the intrinsic value of human rights and more instrumental concerns related to peace and development.

There is also a poor evidence base for what works in democracy support and what does not - particularly at the policy level. Most democracy research analyses the state of democracy in specific countries (e.g. V-Dem, the Economist Intelligence Unit, Freedom House) or is conducted on specific programmes, but frequently misses the policy level. There is not even reliable data on the funding for democracy support as part of official development assistance. Research on policy is no picnic but our review has attempted to fill an important gap by focusing on specific country examples. Much more is needed.

### **Recommendation: Strengthen our understanding of democracy support.**

In practice, strengthening our understanding of democracy support can be broken down into different elements. There is a need for greater clarity of meaning and purpose (what is democracy support and why are we doing it) and of evidence (what works and what doesn't).

### *Definition of democracy support*

While agreeing to a common European definition of democracy is difficult, identifying the purpose for supporting democracy would help in defining what support for democracy entails. It is likely that this would be more wide ranging than a principled rationale on human rights and therefore touch on many other policy areas, due to the wide array of different actions and actors involved.

### *Improve the evidence base*

Practitioners should seek to cooperate more actively with academics in the assessment of programmes, while greater resources should be dedicated to research at the policy level in EU member states. In the short-term, reliable and comparable data on funding for democracy support needs to be collected. Without reliable data, it is exceedingly difficult to learn and improve. In the long-run, European actors should give serious consideration to creating an academy on democracy in order to provide an institutional home for democracy research and practice.

## **2. PRIORITISATION | When should democracy be prioritised?**

Democratic governance is being challenged around the world. In Europe, these challenges manifest themselves through attacks on independent media and civil society, the undermining of democratic institutions but also increasing protests and calls for greater participation. Several academic studies have underlined that there is a slow but steady process of autocratisation (or democratic backsliding) within the EU. At the same time, there has been a noticeable shift towards a greater focus on security and migration in EU foreign policy in recent years. These changes are less radical than many suggest - democracy has always been a lower order concern for most European states - but they do point to an emerging trend that risks undermining the long-term goals and credibility of the EU.

European engagement with dictatorships is nothing new - and it continues to undermine credibility and the coherence of EU policies. Yet, one cannot simply ignore or fail to engage with autocratic regimes. What is new is that there is greater competition in development policy from undemocratic powers. A host of different authoritarian regimes (China, Saudi Arabia, Russia, UAE, Iran) have become far more assertive in recent years particularly as donors or creditors to various countries around the world. The conditions and amounts are often more attractive for rulers and political elites than what Europeans can offer. If this is the case, then what actually separates European engagement from others? What is the added value?

The increasing assertiveness of undemocratic powers also manifests itself in the difficulty of reaching consensus in multilateral fora. There is a reason democracy is not found in the definition of Sustainable Development Goal 16 of peace, justice and strong institutions. Democratic partners are more likely to support human rights and tend to be much easier to work with on global challenges. The United States, for better and for worse, has linked support for democracy to foreign policy in a far more explicit manner than most European states. Given the concerns within Europe and the changed international environment, it is time for the EU to get serious about the importance of democracy in terms of its own short and long-term interests.

### **Recommendation: Accord greater importance to democracy in policy.**

Democracy should feature higher up the list of policy priorities of European states for reasons of principle but also self-interest. This not only involves pro-democracy policies but, crucially, avoiding supporting authoritarian regimes inadvertently.

#### ***Get serious about democracy***

Democracy is not just a slogan, it is something that must be actively strengthened and defended - often at the expense of other priorities. This is true in all regions of the world, including within the European Union. Foreign policy will always involve trade-offs, but overlooking democracy has become an increasingly risky endeavor in recent years. The new geopolitical reality means that democracy is even more vital for the long-term prosperity and security of European nations. Member states should make this clear.

#### ***Adopt a “do no harm” principle to guide external action***

Conversely, authoritarian governments should not be unintentionally reinforced. Such regimes are often strengthened both economically and in terms of legitimacy through engagement with other global actors and the international financial system. The principle of “do no harm” should guide all external action, meaning the EU should carefully consider the impact engagement with a country has on democratic processes and refrain from actions that may strengthen authoritarian regimes (e.g. direct financial support).

### 3. POLICY | What should be done?

Search for the word democracy in policy documents and it will appear in various different guises, sometimes dressed up through European values, sometimes stripped down to good governance. Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union provides that the EU is founded on the values of freedom and democracy (among others), while Article 21 notes that EU external action is guided by those same principles. Indeed, democracy is frequently referenced as a principle in external action documents rather than as a policy goal - with some notable exceptions.

In 2009, all EU member states agreed to an 'Agenda for Action' on democracy support in external relations - the first such commitment from the EU. This was followed up by a Strategic Framework and Action Plan on human rights and democracy in 2014. An updated Action Plan for human rights and democracy was agreed in 2015 and another from 2020 onwards is in the pipeline. The legal documentation associated with the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) provides different descriptions of the scope of many activities of EU support for democracy.

Nevertheless, there is no overarching document that outlines the strategy, objectives or approach for European democracy support. This has resulted in a dispersal of activities, which has ultimately led to more process-oriented, technical and depoliticised programmes that miss some key obstacles to democratisation. This is a missed opportunity for strategic engagement, for effectiveness and for complementarity between EU and EU member states' democracy assistance. Despite all the talk of democracy, there is thus no clear agreement to guide the EU institutions or EU member states.

#### **Recommendation: Develop a policy framework on democracy support.**

An EU policy framework should set out the strategy, objectives and approach of European democracy support. The EU can take inspiration from Sweden's development cooperation policy, which outlines the rationale for supporting democracy, the long-term policy direction, a definition of democracy, and the



types of actions that constitute democracy support. At EU level, the policy framework on cyber security support or on transitional justice could serve as examples of a comprehensive policy document. The development of guidelines on democracy or the integration of pro-democracy policy into other existing operational processes would also be important steps in the same direction.

## 4. FUNDING | How to do it right?

The EU and EUMS have taken significant steps forward in recent years in order to address certain funding gaps such as financing to small scale initiatives, unregistered entities and human rights defenders in autocratic states. Our analysis has shown that while a majority of funding goes to the state - the natural bilateral partner - there have been substantial investments to other actors within the democratic system. Yet, a focus on the executive can be problematic at a time where there is increasing evidence of the executive branch of government undermining the separation of powers, independent media and civil society in different states around the world.

It is unrealistic to expect change to come from the top. Change happens in a variety of different ways that are not predictable and there is a growing realisation among donors and lenders, including institutions such as the World Bank, that development is a fundamentally political process. While many European states clearly understand this and ‘think’ politically, it is much harder to find those who ‘do’ things with a politically aware mindset. The challenge of uncertainty, systems thinking, learning by doing (including through failure) and giving priority to local knowledge does not tend to sit well with the classic development approach of control, logframes, risk minimisation, and predictable, tangible results. Democratic development is even more of a political process but is still, broadly speaking, subject to the same approach.

### **Recommendation: Innovate funding to match current challenges.**

In practice, funding mechanisms could be updated through a greater focus on change and the recognition of the specificities of democracy support through special funding rules.

### *Programming focused on change*

Donors need to embrace complexity without becoming consumed by a lack of predictability. In an authoritarian context, fundamental change is not likely to occur from a change of heart at the top without significant pressure from below. Donors must shift any direct financial support to government towards non-state actors in cases of autocratisation. In other circumstances, this means linking political intelligence to programming decisions in a more systematic manner.

### *Specific funding rules for democracy support*

Democratic development is not linear and occurs in fits and starts. This requires adaptability and patience. Like conflict prevention, which benefits from specific funding modalities at EU level, it may also call for rapid reaction in the case of democratic breakthroughs. Donors should therefore give serious consideration to specific rules for democracy support programmes. These should include building in means for extending successful programmes, the provision of long-term institutional funding to key national actors, a mechanism for rapid response and the use of new evaluation methods. These specificities - including the risks of potential failure - need to be recognised as vital by oversight bodies such as the European Parliament and the European Court of Auditors at EU level.

## **5. COORDINATION | Who does what?**

The more people involved, the harder it is to coordinate. At the level of EU member states, democracy support can be the preserve of a foreign ministry, shared with a development ministry, or sometimes also shared three ways as part of a trade related ministry. This is compounded by the ambiguous position of democracy in relation to development, peace and human rights. Naturally, one finds that where tasks are divided there is usually an element of inter-institutional rivalry that plays a role in undermining coordination. And that is just democracy support outside of Europe. There is an increasing recognition that one cannot divorce the challenges for democracy abroad from those within Europe, particularly in the digital sphere.

Finding the right balance for effective coordination is no walk in the park and is compounded by the fact that the EU operates with 28 such models in cooperation. Coordination for EU diplomats is therefore a much thornier task than for those working for EUMS. Nevertheless, the upgrading of European Commission delegations under the TEU into full diplomatic missions authorised them to speak for the entire Union in particular countries, which has helped provide incentives for coordination. Other such measures should be considered.

**Recommendation: Dedicate greater resources to manage coordination.**

A clearer line of coordination on democracy issues should be established among member states and the EU institutions. This should serve two purposes, to a) manage policy priorities and b) coordinate democracy aid. Dedicating more human resources towards democracy is an important first step in both cases. There are different means of supporting this: for instance, through a democracy coordinator in the Council who would be able to straddle democracy inside and outside Europe or a permanent democracy grouping bringing together key actors. At country-level there is still a need to coordinate democracy support programmes to ensure complementarity between member states.



**The European Partnership for Democracy is  
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